Internet: a new potential for European political communication

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Zusammenfassung

Ob das Internet durch die Ermöglichung neuer Formen politischer Kommunikation positive oder negative Auswirkungen auf die Konstitution demokratischer und transnationaler Öffentlichkeiten hat, ist Gegenstand kontroverser Debatten, die weitgehend auf spekulativer Ebene stattfinden. Dieses Papier untersucht, wie hierarchisch politische Kommunikation im Internet tatsächlich ist und inwieweit sie zu einer Europäisierung von Öffentlichkeiten beitragen könnte. Beide Fragen werden aus einer vergleichenden Perspektive behandelt, indem die Ergebnisse einer inhaltsanalytischen Untersuchung politischer Kommunikation im Internet den Ergebnissen einer vergleichbaren Analyse der traditionellen Printmedien gegenüber gestellt werden. Untersucht wird der Raum politischer Kommunikation im Internet, der durch Suchmaschinen aufgespannt wird, da diese eine der meistgenutzten Orientierungshilfen bei der Beschaffung von Online-Informationen sind. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass das Internet nicht-institutionalisierten Akteuren tatsächlich etwas bessere Möglichkeiten bietet, öffentliche Sichtbarkeit zu erlangen, als die traditionellen Printmedien – wenn auch in einem weit geringeren Ausmaß als häufig vermutet. Hinsichtlich der Potentiale einer europäisierten, transnationalen Kommunikation zeigen wir, dass durch das Internet, zumindest wenn Suchmaschinen verwendet werden, ähnlich wie durch die traditionellen Printmedien vor allem nationale Akteure und Themen öffentliche Sichtbarkeit erlangen.

Abstract

Whether the possibilities for new forms of political communication that are offered by the Internet have positive or negative impacts on the constitution of democratic and transnational public spheres is a controversial debate that so far involves much speculation. This paper investigates how hierarchical political communication on the Internet actually is and to what degree it may contribute to a Europeanisation of public spheres. We address both aspects comparatively by contrasting content-analytic findings on political communication in the Internet with similar data drawn from the traditional print media. Our focus is on the political communication made visible by search engines, one of the most frequently used means for online information retrieval. We show that the Internet indeed offers somewhat better opportunities for non-institutional actors, but the discrepancy to the traditional media is not nearly as large as is often assumed. Regarding the potential for Europeanised, transnational communication, our findings indicate that the Internet, at least as far as it is accessed by way of search engines, is as strongly bound to national actors and issues as the traditional media.

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Introduction

Within the framework of the larger Europub.com project,[1] special attention is paid to the potential impact of new emergent forms of public sphere that are driven by changes in communications technology, and which provide new opportunities for political interaction by organisations and citizens in the public domain. In this paper, we will investigate the nature of the emergent communicative space that is carried by new media and in particular the Internet. Our concern is to capture the dynamic and emergent capacities for political communication that are becoming available to Europe's publics via their access to Internet websites. Much of the literature on the potential for new forms of political communication through the new media visualises the rise of the Internet as a positive development for democracy. For example, Kellner (1998) states that the Internet has produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas. Negroponte (1995) even sees the potential of the digital technology to be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony. Others take a more critical view, seeing access to the Internet simply as another medium that will replicate and perhaps exacerbate the existing divisions between the "haves" and "have-nots" among collective actors in terms of their access to politics and capacities to mobilise public attention. Kubicek (1997) states that the Internet has very different functions and consequences under different environmental conditions, so that it can be fitted into almost all existing socio-cultural settings and is more likely to consolidate and strengthen them than to act as a causal agent of change. Sunstein (2001) argues that the Internet may create a high degree of social fragmentation (balkanisation), of group polarisation and of local cascades, which may produce severe risks for democracy. As yet such debates have been couched largely in normative terms, which is perhaps not surprising considering the large amount of speculation involved. Our aim is to remain future-oriented but to make predictions that start out from empirically grounded findings.

We will do so by presenting first results of an empirical analysis of Internet political communication in seven European countries (D, F, UK, NL, I, E, CH) and on

1 This project is sponsored by the European Commission in the context of its 5th Framework programme (project number HPSE-CT2000-00046). For an outline, see Koopmans and Statham (2002), available on the project website at <http://europub.wz-berlin.de>.

the EU-level. Since public spheres are understood as spaces that are in principle accessible for everybody, only the World Wide Web fulfils this basic requirement among the numerous Internet features available. Thus, our analysis focuses on communicative spheres opened up by the World Wide Web. For this paper we refer to the results for the German case. We coded texts appearing on the Internet in six policy fields (monetary politics, agriculture, immigration, troops deployment, education, pensions) as well as on the topic of European integration within two periods of time in 2002. Within these texts, we coded individual political claims made by collective actors on these issues. Obviously, we could not code everything that was offered on the Internet and had to draw a sample. This was done in such a way that our sample mirrors the way in which most Internet users retrieve information, namely by entering selected key words in search engines.

We will try to answer two central questions regarding the role of the Internet for political communication in this paper. First, we ask if indeed as is often argued, the Internet provides better opportunities for less-institutionalised actors from within civil society to participate in public debates and deliberation than is possible through the traditional mass media. The latter are characterised by a strong selection bias — driven by journalists' commitment to so-called "news values" — in favour of state representatives and institutional interests. Much of the literature on the Internet argues that this new communication technology allows less resourceful actors to circumvent these selection barriers and directly communicate with other collective actors, policymakers, and with the wider public (e.g., Marschall 1997). Against this, one may argue that the Internet, too, is hierarchically structured, because the large majority of people do not access the Internet randomly, but use portals, catalogues, and above all search engines to find information. Rössler (1999: 119) describes search engines as an automated variant of a gatekeeper, whose catalogue of criteria is defined by the users themselves. These Internet gatekeepers may or may not be equally selective as the journalists and editors who are the gatekeepers of the traditional media public sphere, or they may be selective in different ways. Presently, we know virtually nothing about this, and our paper aims to begin filling this gap. Obviously, to be able to judge the selectiveness of the Internet we need a standard of comparison. For this we use data on political claims as covered in the traditional mass media. This allows us to compare the actors and issues appearing in the traditional media to those on the Internet.

Our second central question refers to the potential contribution of the Internet to a Europeanisation of public communication and mobilisation. Given the inher-

ently transnational character of Internet technology, and the possibilities for multilingual communication supply, the Internet might be considered a medium that may help overcome some of the infrastructural and linguistic (national) boundaries that have often stood in the way of an Europeanisation of traditional media public spheres. Theoretically, the Internet is a public space without borders in which it is as easy and as cheap to communicate with one's neighbour as with someone on the other side of the globe. Moreover, ownership as well as usage of the organisations (portals, search engines, providers, etc.) that structure access to the Internet are generally much more transnational than the still mainly national scope of print and audiovisual media. All this would suggest that the Internet provides much better opportunities for transnational actors, and European ones in particular, to achieve public visibility and resonance. Even if the actors themselves remain nationally based, we might expect them to find better opportunities to make claims on European and transnational institutions or to frame their demands in ways that go beyond national borders. Against this one may hold a more sceptical view, which emphasises the subordinate role that political communication plays on the Internet, as well as the continuing relevance of national languages as the preferred medium of access. Again, we do not know which of these views is true because of a virtual absence of empirical data. We will again address this issue comparatively and contrast degrees and types of Europeanisation in the traditional mass media with those found on the Internet, for instance by looking at the relative prominence of European actors and institutions in these two different types of public sphere.

Selection processes and visibility on the Internet

In order to understand how the Internet may affect patterns of political communication and mobilisation, it is useful to first look at the role of the traditional mass media in the policy process. The theoretical model displayed in figure 1 starts with collective actors who want to influence the policy process. While some resourceful actors may be able to exert such influence without mobilising visibility and support in the public sphere (e.g., by way of lobbying, financial support for political candidates, etc.), most societal interests are not in a position to affect the policy process in such a direct way. They must become publicly visible and mobilise the support of other societal actors. It is through mobilising such public support that they may then exert pressure on policy-makers. This makes collective actors crucially dependent on the mass media, because in modern democratic societies it is only through them that public visibility and support can be gained. Passing the

selection barriers of the mass media is far from self-evident. On a typical day in a medium-sized democratic society, thousands of press statements are issued by a wide variety of parties, interest groups, and voluntary associations, hundreds of demonstrations, pickets, and other protests are staged, and dozens of press conferences vie for the attention of the public. Many of these attempts to enter the public sphere do not receive any media attention at all, some may receive limited and localised coverage, and only very few of them succeed in achieving a high level of public visibility. From communications and media research we know quite a lot about the so-called "news values" that structure the decisions of journalists and editors to assign newsworthiness to "stories" or not (e.g., Galtung and Ruge 1965; Schulz 1976). Generally, these news values privilege public statements and actions by prominent and resourceful actors. In the context of this paper, it is also relevant to mention that the traditional mass media are often also said to have a national bias, in the sense that they tend to emphasise national actors, interests, and perspectives (e.g., Gerhards 1993).

The Internet, now, offers the potential to collective actors to circumvent the traditional mass media and to directly mobilise public visibility through their online presence. This is illustrated by the causal path from left to right through the middle of the figure. At first sight, the Internet seems to be a non-hierarchical communicative space, which allows everybody to present and retrieve information and opinions without being dependent on the selection and description biases of the traditional mass media. With a very limited investment of resources, everybody can set up a homepage and thereby make his or her opinions accessible to a worldwide public. It would be naïve, however, to think that within the Internet selection processes do not play a role. It is easy to see that there must be a heavy selection pressure in the Internet, too. Precisely because it is so easy to set up a web page, there is a huge oversupply of web offerings that vie for the attention of the online public.[2] The amount of available websites is so large that even for a relatively delimited topic it would be impossible for a user to look at all the websites that offer information or opinions on the issue. Apart from the impossibility to look at everything that might be relevant, the enormous number of websites also creates the problem of how to find relevant websites. Without the assistance of some kind

2 Goldhaber uses in this context the term of "attention economy" to describe the more and more scarce good of attention within the digital age and uses it develop his concept of the "Economy of the Net".

of map to guide one through the sheer endless web space, the Internet would be a labyrinth in which nobody would be able to find what he or she is looking for.

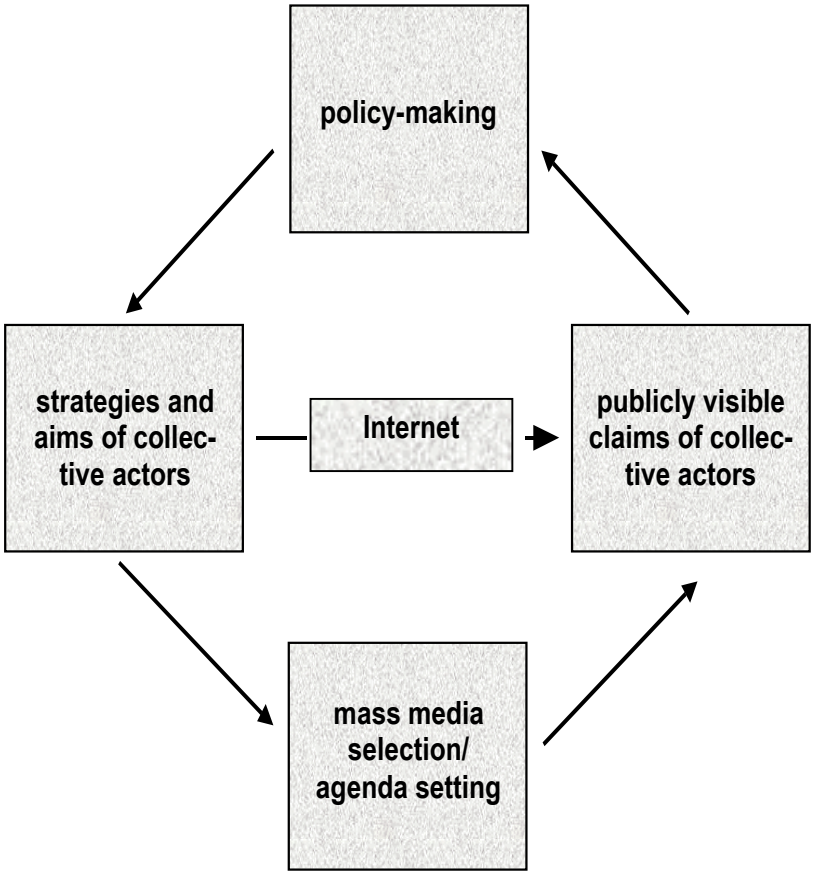

Figure 1: Simplified version of theoretical model.

Therefore the question should be how Internet users actually get to the information they look for? Obviously, it is no problem if the user exactly knows which website of which actor she wants to visit. In this case she simply needs to find out the web-address. To facilitate this, resourceful actors with a web presence are willing to pay substantial sums for a web address that is easy to identify and to memorise. If this would be the only way to retrieve information online the Internet would be not more than a new access to information about actors the user knows and is interested in anyway. There is hardly a qualitative difference in this sense between getting information from or about a certain political actor via the Internet, or by telephone, by mail, or through personal contact. In a quantitative regard, there are of course advantages to using the Internet to contact a political actor or

to get information about his political position: more information can be retrieved more up-to-date and without much effort in time or money. But still this contact depends on a pre-existing knowledge and interest of the public in a particular actor and his positions. Taking into account that in modern societies the public attention given to certain collective actors is strongly influenced by their prominence in the traditional mass media, the Internet would probably only strengthen the existing patterns of access to the public sphere for different actors. Furthermore, the inherent non-hierarchical character of the Internet would not have any practical implications since actors would only be able to become visible if they would be known independently from their online presence, i.e., primarily from their presence within the public sphere of the traditional mass media.

For assessing the Internet's new potential, it is therefore more interesting to look at how information retrieval is structured for users who do not have a pre-existing interest in one particular site of one particular actor, but who want to get information and opinions about a certain topic from a variety of actors and perspectives. In such cases, several studies show that the most often used means of access to web information are search engines and links or recommendations from other websites. Among different studies that analyse how Internet users search for information on the Internet or find out about websites they did not know before, the number of people who use search engines varies between 70% and 90%. Between 60% and 90% follow the links or recommendations on other websites in order to find information online.[3] Search engines and portals select a sample from the numerous websites offered on the Internet in regard to a certain search issue defined by the Internet user. In this way, search engines act as gatekeepers to the web space and disclose a certain part of "online-reality" according to particular criteria.[4] The criteria used to build the data bases[5] and to rank the results in accor-

3 Forrester Research Inc. (2000); Fittkau & Maaß (2000); Graphic, Visualisation & Usability Center (1998); Alexander/Powell/Tate (2001)

4 The following mainly refers to Sullivan (2001) and "How search engines work, search engine features", available online at <http://www.whitelines.nl/html/search-engines.html>.

5 Generally search engines do not search the World Wide Web directly, but the contents of their databases. There are two different kinds of database building and indexing along which search engines can be distinguished, whether the database is build automatically, manually or in a mixed way. Directories depend on humans for building their databases. Short descriptions of the websites are submitted to the search engine's directory by the website's owner, or editors write descriptions for the sites they review. A search looks for matches only in the descriptions submitted. Search engines that create their database automatically are so called "true search engines". They crawl the web by using software called "spiders", "robots" or "crawl-

dance to their relevance tend to differ from one search engine to another. Some offer the possibility to simply buy a high visibility on their search result lists, so that, e.g., when you type in "public sphere" our project website would always come up first. Like the commercial trade in easy web addresses, this selection mechanism simply tends to reproduce offline differences of power on the Internet: the offline rich can buy themselves a prominent web presence. However, most search engines — including the two most often used ones in Germany on which our empirical analysis in this paper is based — use more 'democratic' criteria. Although the exact way in which a search engine's selection process works is a closely-kept trade secret, all major search engines follow, to different extents, some general rules on how to return the most relevant pages on the top of their lists. One primary criteria is the location and the frequency of the key word on a web page as well as whether the key word appears near the top of a web page, such as in the headline, or in the first few paragraphs of the text. The assumption is that any page relevant to the topic will mention those words often and right from the beginning. The location/frequency method is very susceptible to attempts of website owners to influence their position within the result list. By repeating a word hundreds of times on a page (spamming) they try to increase the frequency and thus to get their pages higher in the listing. Search engines watch for common spamming methods in a variety of ways and have also developed so called "off page" rankings criteria that cannot be easily influenced by the webmasters. The most popular one is link analysis. By analysing how pages link to each other, a search engine can both determine what a page is about and whether the page is deemed to be "important" and thus deserves a high ranking within the result list. In addition, sophisticated techniques are used to screen out attempts by webmasters to build "artificial" links designed to boost their rankings. Another "off page" factor is click-through measurement. In short, this means that a search engine may watch what results someone selects from a particular search and then may eventually drop high-ranking pages that are not attracting clicks, while promoting lower-ranking pages that do pull visitors. The criteria of links and click-through measurement are

ers". After spiders find pages, they pass them on to another computer program for "indexing". This program identifies the texts, links, and other content in the page and stores it in the search engine database's files so that the database can be searched by key words and whatever more advanced approaches are offered. Search engines that maintain their databases in both ways, automatically and manually, are called Hybrid search engines. There are also search engines that search several other search engines to compile their result list. These are called Meta Search Engines (e.g., Metager).

emergent phenomena that are neither imposed from above, nor obviously dependent on the amount of resources controlled by an actor. However, since past popularity of a website is in this routine the determinant of the prominence in the search listing, the theoretical effect of such search criteria seems to be a path-dependent process that reinforces the visibility of the websites that are already popular and prominent. This will inevitably introduce inequalities in the Internet space, by making some websites more visible and more easily accessible, and others lesser so. It is an empirical question whether this structuration of the Internet public sphere is more or less biased against non-institutional or transnational actors than the traditional mass media.

In one important sense the role of Internet gatekeepers is certainly much more restricted than that of the traditional mass media. While the mass media not only 'control' who is presented in the public sphere (selection bias) but also how the activities of these actors are presented (description bias), search engines and portals only provide the access to specific actors. On the websites the actors themselves decide which information they want to provide and which not. Furthermore collective actors on the Internet may themselves act as gatekeepers to other information and opinions on the Internet, by way of providing links to other websites. Next to the gatekeeping functions of search engines, this is a second important way in which access to information on the Internet is structured. While search engines and portals guide the user through the Internet space by presenting a hierarchical sample of relevant websites, one may alternatively surf through the web space by jumping via links from one web page to another. We can denote these two types as *vertical, hierarchical selection*, on the one hand, and *horizontal, network selection*, on the other.[6] In this paper, we will especially focus on the first type of selection, via search engines. In a second phase of our Internet research, we will investigate horizontal network linkages between websites more in detail.

Research design

To analyse the spheres of political communication that are selected by search engines we chose the two most often used search engines in each of our countries in order to search the Internet for information about seven policy fields. For

6 Of course, to the extent that search engines use link frequencies as a search criteria, the two selection mechanisms are related.

Germany, these are Google.de and Fireball.de.[7] Since the searches of a search engine can vary from day to day, it was exactly scheduled on which day coders should search with which search string. The first round of coding took place in July 2002 and a second one at the end of November 2002. We used one general and one specific search string for each policy field and translated them in the languages of each of our countries. These search strings were (German translation in brackets)[8]:

(1) *monetary politics:*
   - monetary politics 2002 (Geldpolitik 2002),
   - interest rate decision 2002 (Leitzins Entscheidung 2002);

(2) *agriculture:*
   - agriculture subsidies 2002 (Landwirtschaft Subventionen 2002),
   - BSE cows 2002 (BSE Rinder 2002);

(3) *immigration:*
   - immigration politics 2002 (Zuwanderungspolitik 2002),
   - deportation 2002 (Abschiebung 2002);

(4) *troops deployment:*
   - troops deployment 2002 (Truppen Stationierung 2002),
   - troops peacekeeping 2002 (Truppen Friedenssicherung 2002);

(5) *retirement and pension schemes:*
   - pension politics 2002 (Rentenpolitik 2002),
   - pensions demographic 2002 (Renten demographisch 2002);

7 Sucharchiv.com (4.7.01). Available online: <http://www.sucharchiv.com/ranking.php3?top=30>

8 Given our question about the Internet as a transnational space, it was of course a consideration for us whether we should search in the national language of each of our countries, or, alternatively, should use English everywhere. We decided against the latter option because outside a rather small business and scientific elite, most people search the Internet in their own language. The potential of the Internet as a transnational medium does not lie in English becoming the dominant web language, but in the possibility of offering the same information in a parallel fashion in different languages (as on the official EU website). Such multilingual websites are also picked up by our searches in national languages.

(6) *education:*

- education politics 2002 (Bildungspolitik 2002),
- education equal opportunities politics 2002 (Bildung Chancengleichheit Politik 2002);

(7) *EU integration:*

- EU reforms 2002 (EU Reformen 2002),
- EU enlargement 2002 (EU Erweiterung 2002).

The results listed by the search engines in return to the search queries were coded on different levels. On the result level, we first selected the websites according to aspects of relevance. The websites must be relevant in terms of:

- *content:* the provided information must be relevant and related to the search issue;
- *language:* must be the same as the search language;
- *location:* websites must be located in Europe except for the websites of transnational organisations, which are coded regardless of their geographical locations.[9]

Each website listed in the search results was included and coded until the determined number of relevant websites per list were found (first round: 10; second round: 5). Thus, we get a sample of about 420 websites for each country per sampling period. On the relevant websites we look for information about the search issue in textual form, which is coded on the text level.

In this paper we concentrate on actors that become publicly visible as claimants on the selected websites. A claimant is defined as an actor who performs strategic action in the public sphere (claims-making, Koopmans and Statham 1999). This action consists of the expression of a political opinion by some form of physical or verbal action, regardless of the form this expression takes (statement, violence,

9 This rule was necessary because otherwise we would have ended up coding many non-European websites, particularly for the searches in English, which obviously turned out many websites based in the USA (to a lesser extent, similar problems occurred for the searches in French (e.g., Quebec sites) and Spanish (Latin American sites)). Normally, a user who would want to exclude US sites would probably add "UK" or "Britain" to her search string. However, since we are interested in Europeanisation and transnationalisation this was not an option for us, because our findings would then have been strongly biased towards those with a national scope.

repression, decision, demonstration, court ruling, etc.) and regardless of the nature of the actor (governments, social movements, NGOs, individuals, anonymous actors, etc.). Decisions and policy implementation are defined as special forms of claims-making, namely ones that have direct effects on the objects of the claim.

Claimants can present themselves online on their own homepage or they can be presented on the homepage of other actors. We define these two different forms in which political claims can become visible on the Internet as:

- *autonomous online presence of claimants:* the claimant is the same as the actor who runs the website (medium) and as the actor who wrote the text containing the claim (author);
- *dependent online presence of claimants:* the claimant depends on other actors to make his claim publicly visible. In this case medium and/or author are different actors than the claimant and/or an external gate in addition to the search engine exists.

In all, there are five different roles that actors can perform within the scope of a website:

- *gate:* the actor who runs the website that provides the access to the relevant website (text) via an external link;
- *medium:* the actor who runs the website that actually contains the relevant information;
- *source:* the actor who originally published the text that contains the relevant information;
- *author:* the actor who wrote the text;
- *claimant:* the actor whose political opinion is cited in the text.

For all actors, we code the actor category, name, geographical scope, country and party affiliation. The claims themselves are coded in regard to the issue they are related to, the scope of the issue, as well as the country or countries it refers to. If relevant, we also code the claimant's position towards European Integration.

How non-hierarchical is the Internet?

The prominence of different collective actors in the communicative spaces selected by search engines is investigated on two levels. First, on the level of the actors whose websites are selected by the search engines (mediums and gates), and, second, on the level of the actors whose claims are presented on the websites (claimants). We only include in our analysis the websites that contain any claims

(i.e., in which a position was taken with regard to an issue, as against sites that just present information): 392 out of 420 (93%) websites contained claims.

Table 1 shows the actors who run the websites that were returned by the search engines. In other words, the table includes mediums (websites that contain the relevant information themselves) and gates (websites that lead via an external link to the relevant information). However, external gates do not seem to play an important role. Only 5% of the websites containing information about the search string are offered as external links on a different website. That means, that 95% of the search engine results lead directly to the websites that actually contain the relevant information.

Table 1: Actors that run the websites selected by the search engines as results

State actors	21%
Pure online media	15%
Online edition of offline media	33%
Socio-economic interest groups	13%
Social and educational organisations	9%
NGOs/social movement groups	7%
Others/unknown	2%
Total (%)	100%
Total (N)	392

Table 1 shows that traditional media that offer online editions account for 33% of the websites that are selected by the search engines, followed by state actors (21%). Pure online media (including online newspapers/magazines, ISP's, portals, etc.) are less than half as often the provider of political information as the online editions of traditional media. If we look at the distribution of actors from the point of view of their degree of institutionalisation, we see that civil society actors with an intermediate level of institutionalisation (socio-economic interest groups and social, scientific and educational organisations) taken together account for 22% of all websites, and are thereby as prominent in the online political communicative sphere as the highly institutionalised state actors (21%). However, civil society

actors with a low degree of institutionalisation such as NGOs and social movement groups are clearly less prominent (7%).

Table 2 offers a somewhat different perspective and looks at the actors who actually make publicly visible claims on the websites selected by the search engines. Recall that these are not necessarily the same as the actors who run the selected websites, because websites may offer a platform to claims by other actors.

Table 2: Claimants

State actors	59%
Media	7%
Socio-economic interest groups	13%
Social and educational organisations	11%
NGOs/social movement groups	8%
Other/unknown	3%
Total (%)	100%
Total (N)	392

At first sight, the data on the claimant level indicate that the Internet is not so "open" and non-hierarchical as is often suggested. State actors account for 59% of all claimants and only 8% of the claims found on the websites were made by NGOs and social movement actors such as migrant organisations, human rights organisations or environmental groups. The remainder of actors consist with 24% of institutionalised interest and professional groups, such as labour unions, churches, universities or research institutions. Compared to the preceding table, an important difference is the much lower percentage of media actors. This is due to the fact that the texts on the websites of online media in the majority of cases did not contain the media's own opinion, but presented the opinion or actions of other collective actors.

The following table 3 shows to what extent different claimants were made visible through their own websites (autonomous presence), or on the websites of other actors (dependent presence).

Table 3: Claimants according to different forms of online presence

	Dependent Presence	Autonomous Presence
State actors	75%	25%
Media	36%	64%
Socio-economic interest groups	45%	55%
Social and educational organisations	56%	44%
NGOs/social movement groups	58%	42%
Other/unknown	82%	18%
Total (%)	65%	35%
Total (N)	256	136

Chi-Square Tests	***Value***	***df***	***Asymp. Sig.***
Pearson Chi-Square	*33,552(a)*	*5*	*.000*

The data show that only 35% of the claimants reaches the audience directly, whereas the remaining 65% depend on other actors for gaining public visibility on the Internet. This is an important finding given the fact that the hopes for the Internet as a more egalitarian form of communicative space are based on the unfiltered access to the public for collective actors, and especially for less-institutionalised actors. When the different types of actors are compared, greater differences appear. State actors are in nearly two third of the cases dependent on other actors for generating their online presence, while media have with 64% mainly an autonomous online presence. Socio-economic interest groups are also more often visible online in an autonomous way, whereas the only presence of social and educational organisations and NGOs is more often dependent than autonomous. The data suggest that the type of online presence is not related to the degree of institutionalisation of collective actors. We can check this by looking at the same data from a different angle and compare the actor distributions for autonomous and dependent claimants (table 4).

Table 4: Different kind of online presence (claimants)

	Dependent Presence	Autonomous Presence	Percentage of All Claimants
State actors	68%	42%	59%
Media	4%	13%	7%
Socio-economic interest groups	9%	20%	13%
Social and educational orgs.	9%	14%	11%
NGOs/social movement groups	7%	10%	8%
Unknown/unspecified	4%	2%	3%
Total (%)	100%	100%	100%
Total (N)	256	136	392

Chi-Square Tests	***Value***	***df***	***Asymp. Sig.***
Pearson Chi-Square	*33,552(a)*	*5*	*.000*

On the basis of this table, it becomes clear that there are actually differences in the degree of bias in favour of institutional actors between the two forms of Internet presence. Although state actors are the most prominent claimants among both forms of online presence, they are generally less dominant when the claimants have an autonomous online presence. Especially the more established forms of civil society organisations (socio-economic interests groups and social and educational organisations), seem to be able to use their own websites to directly reach an online audience. NGOs and social movement groups, however, are not able to the same extent to reach their audiences in this direct way, and are about as marginal among the autonomous claimants as among the dependent ones.

In the next table 5, we take a closer look at how the more hierarchical distribution of dependent actors is constituted. The table shows us which websites (mediums) offer a platform for which types of claimants. The table shows that in about two-thirds of the cases (186 out of 256, 65%), it is online media that offer a platform for the claims of other collective actors. These media strongly privilege state actors (70%), and give little attention to civil society organisations, particularly to NGOs and social movements. In this sense, then, online media do not seem to be very different from offline media. If we look at the remaining one-third of the cases in

Table 5: Mediums that present dependent claimants

		Medium					
		State Actors	News Media	Socio-Economic Interest	Social/ Educational Orgs.	NGOs	Total
Claimants	State actors	74%	70%	67%	68%	56%	68%
	Media	4%	1%	10%	5%	6%	4%
	Socio-economic interest	13%	8%	14%	0%	6%	9%
	Social/educational organisations	0%	10%	10%	26%	0%	9%
	NGOs	9%	7%	0%	0%	22%	7%
	General public	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
	Unspecified	0%	2%	0%	0%	11%	2%
	Total (%)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	Total (N)	23	168	21	19	18	256

Chi-Square Tests	*Value*	*df*	*Asymp. Sig.*
Pearson Chi-Square	*74,861(a)*	*30*	*.000*

table 5 where non-media actors offer a platform to the claims of other actors, we see that the pattern is not much different. State actors profit most from attention given to them by other actors. Even the websites of NGOs and social movements that give a space to the opinions of other actors do so most frequently to the benefit of state actors. Thus, the centrality of state actors in the political process also seems to give them a central role in political communication on the Internet.

All in all, the space for political communication opened up by search engines shows clear patterns of hierarchy. State actors and media are the actors that dominate online political communication. By contrast, socio-economic interest groups and social and educational organisations are much less than state actors. The least prominent actors in the Internet public sphere as it is disclosed by search engines are the same actors that are weakly represented in the offline policy process, namely NGOs and social movement organisations. However, these results not-

withstanding, it may nevertheless be the case that political communication on the Internet is *less* hierarchical than in the traditional mass media. To investigate this, table 6 compares the results for the Internet to data on the visibility of different actors in (offline) newspapers in the year 2002. These data were also collected within the larger Europub.com project. For the German case in the year 2002 we have explored the structure of claims-making in the two quality newspapers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Our sample includes one issue of each newspaper per week. The variables we use for our comparisons in this paper have been coded in the same way within the newspaper analysis and the Internet analysis. In both work packages the selection of the issue fields was also the same. Nevertheless, the newspaper data must be taken as a rough standard of comparison since in the newspaper we looked for all claims that were related to the seven issue fields, while we concentrated the claims-analysis of the online sphere on specific search strings that circumscribe more narrowly defined themes within these issue fields. Nonetheless, the comparison allows a first assessment of the differences between the traditional print media and the online public sphere.

This comparison shows that the Internet indeed tends to be more easily accessed by extra-institutional actors than the print media public sphere. Even though on the Internet only 8% of the claimants were NGOs and social movements, this is still substantially more than in our newspaper sources, where the respective figure is a mere 1%. Conversely, state actors are less dominant in the online public sphere (59%) than in the print media public sphere (69%). In regard to the more institutionalised civil society actors, the newspapers as well as the Internet seem to have a slight preference for socio-economic interest groups. Nevertheless, social, scientific and educational groups occur about twice as frequently on the Internet than they do in the newspapers. Thus, even though in an absolute sense the Internet sphere of political communication as disclosed by search engines is not nearly as egalitarian as many want us to believe, the Internet nevertheless seems to offer better opportunities for non-institutional actors to achieve public visibility than the traditional print media.

Table 6: Actor type of claimants on the Internet and in the newspapers

	Internet			Newspapers
	General Presence	Autonomous Presence	Dependent Presence	
State actors	59%	42%	68%	69%
Media	7%	13%	4%	14%
Socio-economic interest groups	13%	20%	9%	10%
Social and educational orgs.	11%	14%	9%	6%
NGOs/social movement groups	8%	10%	7%	1%
Other/unknown	3%	2%	2%	1%
Total (%)	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total (N)	392	136	256	559

Chi-Square Test[10]	***Value***	***df***	***Asymp. Sig.***
Pearson Chi-Square	*71,129(a)*	*6*	*.000*

How transnational and especially how Europeanised is the Internet?

Our next step is to explore whether the inherently transnational character of the Internet infrastructure is reflected in the nature of online political communication. Our data allow us to look at various dimensions of transnationalism corresponding to the different actor types (gate, medium, source, claimant) which we have introduced above. Here, however, we again focus on claimants, i.e., on those actors whose political opinions are made visible in the communicative sphere selected by search engines.

Table 7 shows the geographical scopes of the claimants and allows us to see to what extent the organisations who made claims in the different issue fields were

10 The Pearson Chi-Square only refers to the comparison between the newspapers and the general online presence.

organised on the transnational, and especially on the European level. As could be expected, the actor scopes vary as a function of the political level that dominantly regulates the policy field. As a result, European-level actors are most frequent as claimants in the fields of monetary politics and European integration. In all other issue fields most of the claimants are German actors, except for the field of troops deployment. Here, most of the claimants are from non-EU countries.

Table 7: Scope of claimants per issue field

	Mone-tary	Agri-culture	Immi-gration	Troops	Pen-sions	Educa-tion	EU	All
Other supra- and international	0%	7%	0%	23%	0%	4%	4%	5%
European	46%	13%	2%	2%	5%	0%	35%	15%
National: Germany	22%	49%	86%	30%	86%	75%	33%	55%
National: other EU	4%	11%	5%	13%	4%	13%	23%	10%
National: non-EU	24%	20%	4%	32%	4%	9%	5%	14%
Unclassifiable	6%	0%	4%	0%	2%	0%	0%	2%
Total *(%)*	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total *(N)*	55	55	56	56	57	56	57	392

Chi-Square Test	***Value***	***df***	***Asymp. Sig.***
Pearson Chi-Square	*224,422(a)*	*30*	*.000*

The overall distribution of actor scopes shows that more than half of the claimants found are German actors. Actors on the European level account for 15% of the claimants, but as the table shows there is a large variation between the issue fields in this regard. Particularly the fields of immigration, education, and pensions politics are very much dominated by German actors and show almost no involvement of European-level or other transnational actors. National actors from non-EU countries are present with 14% across all issue fields, whereas national actors from other EU countries than Germany account for only 10% of all claimants. The fact that in most issue fields (the main exception being of course the field of European integration itself) actors from non-EU countries play a more important role than those from EU member countries does not seem indicative of a strong

level of Europeanisation. All in all, we may thus conclude that the actors whose political claims become visible on the Internet remain mostly nationally based. The inherent transnational character of the Internet infrastructure is thus not reproduced in the political communication that we find on the Internet, and the theoretical potential for cheap and easy transnational political communication does not seem to have been realised so far to a very significant extent.

Perhaps, however, there are differences in the openness of the online communicative sphere towards transnational and European actors between our two different kinds of online presence. The data in table 8 indicate that the share of transnational claimants is actually considerably higher among the actors with a dependent online presence than it is among actors with an autonomous online presence. While German claimants account for 75% of all autonomous claimants, they make up only 44% of all dependent claimants.

Table 8: Scope of claimants according to kind of online presence

	Dependent	Autonomous
Other supra- and international	7%	2%
European	19%	6%
National: Germany	44%	75%
National: other EU	10%	11%
National: non-EU	18%	6%
Unclassifiable	2%	1%
Total (%-columns)	100%	100%
Total (N)	256	136
Total (%-rows)	65%	35%

Chi-Square Test	***Value***	***df***	***Asymp. Sig.***
Pearson Chi-Square	*42,915(a)*	*5*	*.000*

Claimants with a transnational scope play a more important role in the context of dependent online presence (26%) than they do in the context of autonomous online presence (8%). The same holds for European actors, who account for 19%

of the dependent claimants and 6% of autonomous claimants. This suggests that European actors depend strongly on other actors to gain visibility on the Internet and are hardly able to attain online visibility directly.

Generally, the strong dominance of national actors revealed in table 8 relativises the idea of the Internet as a place par excellence for transnational political communication. But again, the question must be put in a relative perspective, comparing the Internet to the traditional mass media. This we do in table 9.

Table 9: Scope of claimants on the Internet and in the newspapers

	Internet	Newspapers
Other supra- and international	5%	3%
European	15%	14%
National: Germany	55%	56%
National: other EU	10%	13%
National: non-EU	14%	14%
Unclassifiable	2%	1%
Total (%)	100%	100%
Total (N)	392	559

Chi-Square Tests	***Value***	***df***	***Asymp. Sig.***
Pearson Chi-Square	*7,203(a)*	*5*	*0.206*

The comparison with the newspaper data shows that there are no significant differences between the degree of transnational claimants on the Internet and in our newspaper sources. The slightly lager number of transnational claimants on the Internet (Internet: 20%, newspaper: 17%) is, as the chi-square statistic shows, not significant. The same applies to the slightly larger number of claimants from other EU countries in the newspapers. Finally, the percentage of German actors in both types of public sphere is almost identical (56% in the newspapers, 55% on the Internet).

However, tendencies towards a transnationalisation or Europeanisation of political communication must not necessarily always be reflected in the organisational

scope of the actors who make claims, but may alternatively show up in the substantive content of the claims made by these actors. To investigate this, we look in table 10 at the scope of the issue as seen by the actor who makes the claim, i.e., we look at the geographical and/or political frame of reference that the actor indicates as relevant for the issue. Here too, we compare the Internet with the print media public sphere in order to gauge the relative importance of transnational and European dimensions.

Table 10: Scope of issue on the Internet and in the newspapers

	Internet	Newspapers
Other supra- and international	19%	18%
European	33%	34%
National: Germany	35%	37%
National: other EU	4%	4%
National: non-EU	8%	6%
Unclassifiable	1%	–
Total (%)	100%	100%
Total (N)	392	559

Chi-Square Tests	***Value***	***df***	***Asymp. Sig.***
Pearson Chi-Square	*3,838(a)*	*5*	*0.573*

The data suggest again that there are no significant differences between the Internet and the newspaper data. The degrees to which issues are framed referring to the European level (vertical Europeanisation) as well as referring to other European countries (horizontal Europeanisation) are virtually the same within both spheres of political communication.

Conclusions

The tentative findings we have presented in this paper indicate that political communication on the Internet as it is selected by search engines shows clear constraints regarding openness and transnationality. Media are still the most important providers of information, and online editions of the traditional offline media are much more important than pure online media. In regard to the actors

whose claims are presented on the websites, the highly institutionalised actors are the most dominant ones, while non-institutionalised actors are rather marginal. The interesting point is that even though the media influence this distribution to a large extent because of their dominant role as providers of the information, the preference for presenting state actors is also observable on the websites of the less institutionalised civil society actors. Even though the online sphere of political communication clearly has hierarchical patterns, the Internet seems nevertheless to offer better opportunities for non-institutional actors to achieve public visibility than newspapers.

To a significant extent the theoretical potential for a more transnationalised political communication on the Internet does not seem to have been realised yet. At least with respect to the communicative sphere selected by the search engines, the inherent transnational character of the Internet infrastructure is not reproduced. Nationally-based state actors are by far the most prominent claimants. The same can be asserted in regard to Europeanisation, as a specific form of transnationalisation. If Europeanised forms of communication are observable, they mainly occur in the form of vertical Europeanisation by referring to the European level or presenting European claimants. Horizontal forms of Europeanisation that refer to actors from other European countries or present claimants from these countries are much less important and are often even less important than references to non-EU countries. All together, our results imply that the sphere of political communication selected by search engines does not contribute to a Europeanisation of public communication and mobilisation to a larger degree than the traditional print media public sphere. This is true both regarding the presented claimants, and the geographical and/or political frame of reference that the claimants indicate as relevant for the issue.

The analysis of the communicative space opened up by search engines was our first step to assess how online political communication is structured. Our starting point of analysis were the Internet users themselves, or rather the communicative sphere that is selected by the way in which the Internet is mostly used when people are looking for information. The next step will be to explore how the collective actors themselves use the Internet, and what the communicative space opened up by collective actors looks like. This second part of our Internet analysis, for which the data collection has started recently, is focused on the exploration of the link structure that connects collective actors among themselves. The link structures among the websites of actors can be understood as social networks of a new kind

of connectivity. According to this view, our data will be collected in a way that allows us to analyse these networks with different methods of social network analysis. The questions we are mostly interested in are: How hierarchical are these networks in regard to the positioning of less institutionalised actors? How different are the link structures within different policy fields? Are there transnational networks? Are there European networks either on a horizontal level by linking national actors from European countries or in a hierarchical way through linkages between national actors and European actors? Are there differences in the degree of using the Internet for opening up a transnational sphere of communication among the different types of actors and/or political-ideological camps/families, etc.?[11] Together with the analysis of search engine results presented in this paper, this follow-up study of online network structures will give us a more encompassing basis to assess the Internet's potential for the development of a transnational, democratic public sphere.

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11 Our sample will include collective actors involved in three issue fields (agriculture, immigration and European Integration) in our seven countries and on the European and on other supranational levels. For each country we analyse the link structure among the websites of 150 collective actors that are prominent in the three issue fields. These actors will be selected from five different types of actors: state actors, political parties, interest groups, NGOs, and media actors. In regard to the transnational level, we analyse 75 websites of European actors and 75 websites of other supranational actors. Altogether we will have a sample of 1200 websites, which will allow us to analyse the structural features of the networks opened up by links — or not opened up by them — on several levels: the national level, the multilateral level among the countries of our analysis, the European level and other transnational levels.

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